



Advocacy Principles and 2024 Business Issues Agenda

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Advocacy Principles

The Eau Claire Chamber's mission - to be the "Advocate of Business" and its motto, "Our Community is Our Business" - both point to the importance of Advocacy as one of our core pillars.

Decisions made at every level of government – whether locally at city hall, school boards, the county courthouse, or in Madison and Washington – have a profound impact on our local businesses and the economy. That is why the Chamber is committed to being your eyes and ears – and, when needed, a non-partisan voice for the business community.

The Chamber accomplishes this through:

- Advocacy on business-related issues at the local, state and federal levels
- Connections and relationships with policy makers
- Timely information and education for Chamber members
- Equipping members for effective involvement and influence

Role in the community

The Chamber will seek to maximize its positive impact in the community through its unique ability to be a...

- **Catalyst** for business growth
- **Convener** of leaders & influencers
- **Champion** for a strong community

3C Chamber concept – Western Assn of Chamber Executives (WACE)

Adopting policies and positions

The Chamber will publish an annual Business Issues Agenda, drafted by the Governmental Affairs Committee, adopted by Board of Directors, and updated as needed. Its purpose is to guide the Chamber's ongoing advocacy activities as specific policy issues are considered at each level of government. Issues that arise that are not included in the agenda may be added upon recommendation of the Governmental Affairs Committee and approved by the Board. If the issue is time sensitive, the Executive Committee may act to determine the Chamber's official position.

It is recognized that businesses and industry sectors may have different priorities and viewpoints. A key part of the Chamber's role is to bring varying interests together, consider relevant viewpoints, and achieve a better understanding of the implications of public policy decisions. Whenever possible, the Chamber's positions will be advanced through consensus regarding the overall best interests of the business community.

Voting Records: The Chamber will publish for educational purposes the recorded votes of elected officials on actions on which the Chamber has taken a position.

Alliances with other organizations

The Chamber maintains relationships with other local, state, and national Chambers of Commerce, as well as trade groups and other organizations interested in business-related public policy. We will work with those organizations to share information and advocate for policy positions when complementary to our own.

The Chippewa Valley Chamber Alliance with the Chippewa Falls and Menomonie Chambers represents a core public policy activity for the Eau Claire Area Chamber. This includes conducting the annual Chippewa Valley Rally legislative day in Madison, as well as cooperation on issues of mutual interest.

Collaboration and cooperation

It is a primary value of the Chamber to build relationships with public officials and governmental entities to work towards the common good for the community. The Chamber is committed to cooperation with other civic organizations to build a strong local economy. In the same context, we encourage elected officials to avoid partisanship and work together to advance wise public policy.

Elections

The Chamber does not endorse candidates for public office, but encourages its investors and all citizens to vote and actively participate in the political process. The Chamber will provide election education, including questionnaires, forums, and other opportunities for voters to meet and learn about the positions of candidates on economic issues.

2024 Business Issues Agenda

Free enterprise

The free enterprise system is essential to a robust economy that provides opportunities to thrive for individuals, families, businesses and the community. The Chamber will view policies through the lens of how they impact such things as economic freedom, competition, profit, and economic opportunity. The Chamber will assert and defend the benefits of free enterprise in the public square to counter misguided biases against business that sometimes exist among policy makers or segments of the public.

Business participation in public policy

As the Advocate of Business, it is a core pillar of the Chamber to act on behalf of the business community. The Chamber also encourages and equips its investors to individually participate in policy deliberations, including exercising their rights as citizens. The Chamber supports the free speech rights for business people, who should not be subjected to discrimination or economic penalties by government or elected officials based upon their personal viewpoints.

Partisanship and respectful debate

The Chamber expects elected public officials to act in the interest of all constituents within their communities. Respectful, fact-based debate should characterize decision making in public policy, keeping the broader public interest in mind and avoiding hyperbole, misleading information, personal attacks, and appeals to fear and emotion. Non-partisan offices should be kept non-partisan, and the Chamber discourages political parties from making endorsements in local non-partisan races.

Stewardship of public resources

Responsive government exists to provide services that are essential and benefit the common good. Taxes are a significant part of the budget of any business or citizen. It is important for all levels of government to be cost-effective and accountable in the use of public resources and tax revenues. Public officials should be held to high ethical standards and expected to make decisions in the best interests of the public.

- Consider tax reform initiatives that would eliminate or significantly decrease the state's income tax burden without jeopardizing overall state revenues and essential services. This would enhance the state's competitiveness and potentially provide an opportunity to address other tax fairness issues.
- The Chamber supports and appreciates the enactment in 2023 of legislation to dedicate 20% of the state sales tax to support of local governments. Going forward, the formula for allocation of these revenues should be reviewed to ensure fairness and avoid complexity. Localities should be in a position to benefit from growing revenues when local sales tax collections increase.

Local control

Public policy issues should be addressed at the level that is most appropriate to their scope and best management. While some issues have policy implications at all levels of government, many do not and should be addressed only by the level of government most responsible for carrying them out.

- Given that local businesses draw customers and employees from across a wide geographic area, it is important to have consistency across local boundaries for some mandates to avoid complexity and extra costs. Business regulations that are best set at the state rather than local level include smoking regulation, employment laws, use of particular materials such as plastics, etc.

Regulations

Government regulation is appropriate when it provides necessary standards to ensure public safety, professional competence, and fairness. It is important to keep regulations up to date based upon changes in technology and best practices. Regulations should not be burdensome in ways that inhibit responsible activities, or serve to block appropriate economic competition.

- Professional standards regulations should be harmonized with other states to make it easier for competent professionals to move from one state to another for employment opportunities.
- The Department of Safety and Professional Services must continue to take steps to eliminate the backlog in occupational licensing. Professionals in many occupations have reported significant backlogs in receiving credentials from DSPS, hampering their ability to work and earn a living. It's important for DSPS to take steps to improve the management of these functions to be responsive to the needs of these professions. In the 2023-24 State budget, the legislature passed and Gov. Evers signed measures to provide additional DSPS staff to help expedite health care licensure. More progress needs to be made so that licenses can be processed in a timely manner.
- The state should have a system to periodically review the need, value, and standards for each profession subject to occupational licensing. We encourage lawmakers to consider additional reforms that streamline the state's licensure system.

Workforce Development

Businesses and organizations in our community provide valuable employment opportunities for individuals to earn income, provide meaningful and productive labor, and build a strong local economy. Employers are currently experiencing significant labor shortages as a result of demographics and other factors. Difficulties in filling positions at all levels and in multiple industries threaten to dampen opportunities for economic growth. The availability and affordability of childcare has become an increasingly acute issue for employers, families, and childcare providers. This has inhibited the ability of families to take full advantage of employment opportunities and for employers to have full access to the potential talent pool. The Chamber supports meaningful public policy solutions to address specific workforce challenges, including:

- Talent attraction and retention: It's essential for the state to help address the workforce shortage through initiatives to attract and retain talent – including marketing the positive attributes of the state and its regions to attract new talent, encouraging former residents and students to return, highlighting opportunities for transitioning veterans, and keeping Wisconsin graduates in the state.
- Childcare availability and affordability for working parents: There is an urgent need for innovation on the part of the state to address the funding, business model, and regulatory oversight of early childhood care and education in ways that will effectively deal with availability, affordability, and accountability for quality and safety. This by necessity must address the business model for childcare providers, especially in their ability to attract and retain motivated, high quality staff.
 - The Chamber encourages leaders on both sides of the aisle to come together to achieve meaningful solutions to the childcare issue.
 - The Chamber supports the tax credit proposal that provides an avenue for employers to assist their workers with the availability and cost of childcare.

- Immigration: Inviting new residents to our nation and community presents a valuable opportunity for employers to offer economic prospects to individuals and families eager to forge a fresh start. It also contributes to enriching the overall quality of life for everyone in the Chippewa Valley.
 - We support the initiatives of the US Chamber of Commerce to encourage Congressional progress in Washington to simultaneously fix the broken legal immigration system and to address border security.
 - The Chamber is committed to ensuring that Eau Claire remains a welcoming community to those who are fleeing peril and persecution in their home countries. Our community has a history of benefiting economically and culturally from the refugees who form our Hmong community. It is important to create a nurturing environment where newcomers can flourish, becoming productive residents, and proud citizens in west central Wisconsin.
- Reforms to the unemployment compensation system
- Support mechanisms for educational skills attainment to fulfill workforce needs.

Housing supply and affordability

The local supply of available and affordable housing impacts our ability to meet the needs of a growing population, as well as affordability for all individuals and families. The Chippewa Valley Housing Task Force found that there is a shortage of housing in our community at all price and income levels. It is important for public policy to encourage increasing the supply of housing and removing barriers to housing development.

- The Chamber will encourage local jurisdictions to follow through on comprehensive planning activities that foresee future housing development. We will support approval of responsible development proposals that meet needs to increase housing supply, including appropriate annexation, zoning, site plan, and other approvals. Although it is often natural for neighbors to resist change, it is important to consider the overall community welfare and give it priority while respecting public input.
- Review, and modify as needed, regulations, policies, and building codes to ensure that they are up to date and do not unnecessarily hamper construction activities or increase costs.
- Provide adequate resources to ensure inspections are carried out in a consistent and timely manner.
- Update zoning codes and policies to eliminate outdated and arbitrary standards in order to encourage infill development, creation of missing middle housing types, a greater diversity of housing choices, compact growth, efficiency of public resources, and the ability to build the types of housing demanded by the marketplace. It is also important to reduce uncertainty in the development process, develop objective standards that can be adhered to without subjective approval processes, and respect property rights.
 - The Chamber supports the process of Zoning Code updates underway in the cities of Altoona and Eau Claire to address these issues and will actively engage to represent the interests of business and the broader community.
- Coordinate housing and transportation policies to maximize the impact of public benefits and resources.
- We support continued efforts on the state level to increase supply and affordability. Legislation enacted in 2023 to ensure local compliance with comprehensive plans and the establishment of programs within the Wisconsin Housing and Economic Development Authority (WHEDA) to incentivize the creation of new housing were positive steps in this direction. We will monitor and look forward to their implementation in 2024.

Education

Our region's public and private education systems are critical assets which provide a strong return on investment for the community and for our economy. A world-class educational system is essential for businesses to remain competitive in a global economy. The Chamber believes that adequate funding, measurement of education outcomes, financial accountability, encouragement of innovation, and rewards for excellence are all important components of any effort to improve quality education from kindergarten to college. The Chamber supports adequate state funding for the UW System and Technical College System, as well as sound local management of K-12 school systems to deliver high academic achievement along with responsible financial management.

- The Chamber successfully supported completion funding in the 2023-25 state budget for the UWEC Science & Health Sciences Building that provides for a single replacement building to replace outdated Phillips Science

Hall. Including a key partnership with Mayo Clinic, the project meets 21st century STEM research and education needs, providing regional economic benefits far beyond the borders of the campus. We encourage additional steps to take advantage of economic opportunities created by these partnerships.

- The Chamber appreciates the effective collaboration that takes place among institutions of higher learning in West Central Wisconsin, including UWEC, UW-Stout, UW-River Falls, Chippewa Valley Technical College, and Northwood Technical College. This includes continued enhancement to degree and credit transfer between postsecondary institutions for better career pathways and transferability between higher education systems to provide seamless and affordable education. Through the Chippewa Valley Chamber Alliance and the Chippewa Valley Rally, the Chamber supported the successful funding effort for UW-Stout's Heritage Hall renovation, which will provide value for the entire region.
- UW Campus flexibility: Give the UW System and local campuses the flexibility and autonomy they need to deploy and manage resources, create effective regional consortiums, make curriculum decisions to address region-specific needs, and maintain excellence in their recognized areas of specialization. Specifically provide the UW System with management flexibility in operations and procurement.
- Chippewa Valley Technical College (CVTC) has shown valuable leadership in meeting the needs of employers and community members with responsive education and training, including innovation in course design, being responsive to employer advisory committees, and implementing dual credit initiatives at area high schools. The Chamber strongly supports these initiatives, and the continuation of the current system for funding the technical college system through its operational tax levy that ensures responsiveness to local needs.
- Support and continue to expand Apprenticeship and Youth Apprenticeship programs and funding.

Economic Development

The Chamber supports the efforts of local, regional, and state economic development organizations to promote the community, help existing businesses grow and expand, and ensure the availability of the resources needed for business growth.

- Our area's success in growth and development has led to a potential shortage in properties available for industrial development. We support efforts to secure additional land for these purposes. We also support proactive work by local economic development agencies to assess needs in current and potential retail and housing centers to foster development and redevelopment opportunities.
- The Chamber is committed to enabling economic opportunity for diverse and underrepresented populations. Our partnership with the Hmong Wisconsin Chamber of Commerce (HWCC), whose Eau Claire office is hosted in our building, is a forum for Hmong and Asian American entrepreneurs launching and expanding their businesses. We also will continue to develop and grow our relationships with other statewide chamber entities who have resources for businesses in our region.
- Tax Increment Financing (TIF) has been a critical tool for economic growth that has been used in a successful and responsible manner by local governments in the Chippewa Valley. The Chamber supports its continued availability and careful use for economic development purposes.
- The Chamber supports updating state tax credit incentives to provide opportunities to companies to qualify based upon job retention and/or capital investments, rather than strictly job creation.

Tourism

The Eau Claire area is emerging as a growing tourism destination, with increasing room tax revenues and visitor spending being driven by assets like the Pablo Center and other performance venues, seasonal festivals, outdoor activities, sports tournaments, the arts, and music. Tourism also provides a unique opportunity to draw people to the community as visitors who may become residents.

- The Chamber supports the work of Visit Eau Claire and other area destination marketing organizations and continuing state statutory mandates for the use of room tax revenues to support tourism promotion.
- The Chamber supports continued local efforts to enhance Eau Claire as a destination, including pursuing opportunities to develop needed infrastructure and strengthening marketing initiatives.

Transportation and infrastructure

The Chamber will lead and support partners in developing key community infrastructure that augments the marketplace and cements it as a regional center. Access to high speed internet and a strong, balanced transportation system are critical to a vibrant economy, quality of life, and access to employment and economic opportunity.

- Support investment in broadband expansion that uses proven technologies to significantly expand public access.
- With a growing economy and population, it is important to ensure the specific transportation needs of the Chippewa Valley are addressed through state planning activities and resource allocation to provide a robust, balanced transportation system. This is critical to attract and retain talent, as well as to provide for the effective movement of goods and people. This includes:
 - Adequate funding of local streets and roads.
 - Good repair and adequate capacity on I-94 and its feeder highways.
 - Maintaining essential rail freight services and availability of intermodal freight transportation.
 - Investment for expanded passenger rail service in Wisconsin, including the Chippewa Valley.
 - Strengthening local transit services, especially for access to employment, as well as coordinating housing and transportation policies to maximize the impact of public benefits and resources.
 - Maintaining commercial air travel service and connections from the Chippewa Valley Regional Airport.

Specific current policy priorities in this area include:

- Prioritize continued expansion of broadband access to unserved and under-served areas. Availability of broadband has become as essential in today's economy as electricity and telephone service. Connecting rural Wisconsin towns, villages, and communities with reliable broadband requires a strategic and thoughtful approach. As funding is deployed, it should prioritize appropriate data collection, mapping, and sufficient speeds. Cooperatives, telephone companies, and middle-mile backbone networks all play a critical role in broadband delivery.
- Build out electric vehicle charging infrastructure to include major highway corridors and rural areas. With significant federal funding for EV stations on the way, the preparation, planning, and investments in building out Wisconsin's charging station network must include small and medium-sized communities. Economic development partners like local electric utilities will play an important role in fulfilling the needs of the traveling public. Legislative action is appropriate to incentivize the production and deployment of charging infrastructure. It's important for all parties to work together to solve the issues that held up legislation in the last session, balancing the need to encourage private enterprise with the need to increase access.
- Expand passenger rail service to the Chippewa Valley and other major state cities. We support the expansion of passenger rail service in high-potential Wisconsin corridors as a needed and worthwhile investment for the economic future of our state. The Chicago-Milwaukee Hiawatha train service has been one of the most successful services in the country, and similar benefits should be provided to other major state economic centers. Frequent service to more cities will help attract and retain business and the talent critical to its success; provide a convenient, economical, and environmentally-friendly alternative to driving; accelerate economic growth opportunities; improve quality of life; increase tourism; and add resiliency to our transportation system.
- Address downtown parking, traffic, and visitor experience. With continued new housing, business, arts, and entertainment development, downtown Eau Claire has become a vibrant, desirable destination and is a critical asset for the broader community. Given increased traffic, parking needs, and construction disruptions, this has led to challenges in managing parking and traffic. It's important for the city to work closely with the business community to ensure well-managed access and positive visitor experiences. This should include careful assessment of the issues and implementation of best practices, including:
 - Improved management of parking: Centralized, customer-focused management of parking resources, better public communication and wayfinding for parking availability, consistent enforcement of parking regulations, and development of an overall plan that ensures adequate parking for visitors and employees without diminishing the attractiveness of downtown as a walkable destination. Consider enhancing parking alternatives like improved transit availability and attractiveness. Urgently address undesirable conditions of the Gibson Street Ramp. Fully engage businesses in decisions about parking regulations and

fees. Consider street changes and improvements consistent with the needs to keep the downtown core attractive as a destination.

- Address, in a compassionate but firm manner, perceived and real safety issues related to unhoused individuals, especially with those experiencing mental health and substance abuse problems. Work closely with businesses to provide immediately-available response and resources to handle difficult situations that arise. Collaborate among government, public safety, service agencies, health care, and businesses to identify and deploy resources to address the needs of the individuals who are affected.
- Assess and improve local transit. Eau Claire Transit fulfills an important need in the community, but is a legacy system that has changed only incrementally over time and has not kept up with the growth of the city. Thanks to its partnership with UWEC, it provides a well utilized and essential service for students. Otherwise, however, service hours and frequency are limited, and key areas like the northwest CVTC campuses, the Gateway Industrial Park, and others are not served. As our population grows and downtown and other compact development increases, the future role of transit in meeting community needs should be carefully and comprehensively examined. There are examples in other metro areas across the country where redesigned transit systems have significantly enhanced their value to their communities and economies.

Healthcare

The rising cost of health care is a significant factor in the ability of businesses to compete in the world marketplace and attract the best workforce. Cost containment efforts should be focused on engaging consumers in health care purchasing decisions, improving quality, increasing benefit flexibility and choices, minimizing cost shifting, reforming medical malpractice liability, and improved information technology.

Energy and the environment

Economic growth and environmental progress go hand in hand. Responsible stewardship of our resources can both grow our economy and preserve the planet. Nationally, energy independence is of critical strategic and economic importance for our country.

- The Chamber supports the efforts of our utilities to carefully transition to cleaner energy sources while maintaining cost-effectiveness and full availability of energy to businesses and homes.
- Compact, infill development provides an opportunity to grow housing and commercial opportunities in an environmentally-responsible fashion, reducing the amount of rural land needed for growth and providing more cost-effective utilization of existing infrastructure.
- The environmental impact of a new development is an appropriate and important consideration when assessing its desirability for the community. However, it is essential that such decisions be based upon scientifically verifiable data and estimates of impact, not pseudo-science or emotion.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

The Eau Claire Area Chamber of Commerce affirms the inherent dignity and value of every person and strives to maintain a climate in the community for work and learning based on mutual respect and understanding. The Chamber's Board of Directors adopted its *Principles of Community Around Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion* in 2020. These principles also guide our engagement in public policy.

The *Principles of Community Around Diversity, Equity and Inclusion* is a set of affirmations and statements that the Chamber shares with investors to be an advocate and be as inclusive as possible.

“We affirm the inherent dignity and value of every person and strive to maintain a climate for work and learning based on mutual respect and understanding.

We affirm the right of each person to express thoughts and opinions freely. We encourage open expression with civility, sensitivity, and mutual respect.

We affirm the value of human diversity because it enriches our lives and our organizations. We acknowledge and respect our differences while affirming our common humanity.

We reject all forms of prejudice and discrimination, including those based on age, color, diverse ability, gender, gender identity, gender expression, national origin, political affiliation, race, religion, sexual orientation, and veteran status. We take individual and collective responsibility for helping to eliminate bias and discrimination and or increasing our own understanding of these issues through education, training, and interaction with others.

We pledge our collective commitment to incorporate these principles into our goal of creating a community dedicated to inclusive excellence, where all citizens can live and thrive.”